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SUBJECT: COMMANDER OF UN FORCES IN KOREA GENERAL LAPORTE
DISCUSSES NORTH KOREA WITH AUSTRALIAN FM DOWNER

Classified By: CDA BILL STANTON FOR REASONS 1.4 (A, B AND D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer on February 16, U.S. General Leon LaPorte, Commander of the UN Command in Korea, described the dramatic changes taking place in the ROK, in particular at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), where the UN Command's role is also changing rapidly. He outlined the significant transformation of the U.S. and ROK forces and gave context to the drawdown of 12,500 troops from South Korea, a "rock solid" U.S. ally. While agreeing that the Six-Party Talks should continue, Downer thought the international community ought to do more to pressure the DPRK, such as by invigorating Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) activities against the North Koreans. As LaPorte described the current conventional war-fighting capabilities of the DPRK military, Downer speculated on the actual number of nuclear warheads Pyongyang might possess. Downer suggested that aid that could prop up the DPRK's failing infrastructure should be withheld in order to bring an end to the regime's tyranny. End Summary.

CHANGES ON THE KOREAN PENNINSULA

12. (C) General LaPorte briefed FM Downer, at his request, on the current status of the Korean Peninsula. Explaining that he was visiting Australia and New Zealand in his role as UN, and not U.S., Commander, LaPorte noted the significant changes taking place in the ROK. The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), after 50 years as the world's most heavily defended turf, had also changed dramatically over the past 18 months. While only handfuls of people had traversed the DMZ previously, now hundreds, and potentially thousands, were doing so daily, thanks to the construction of two super highways and railway lines linking the two sides. The UN Command's role was to enforce the armistice and facilitate crossings, so its role was changing as well. This was a result of the Roh Government's outreach policy to the North Koreans. LaPorte praised the ROK as a "rock solid" ally of the U.S.

RECONFIGURING U.S. FORCES

13. (C) Asked by Downer about the downsizing of U.S. Forces in Korea, LaPorte explained that a total of 12,500 U.S. troops would be withdrawn from a total of 37,500 over five years. Five thousand had already departed. Meanwhile, technological capabilities were dramatically improving. The U.S. forces had been spread among 100 camps and stations across South Korea. Where they had once been "at the end of a dusty trail," many of the U.S. bases were now surrounded by urban developments and therefore needed to be reconfigured. As both U.S. and ROK forces transformed and consolidated their bases to reduce irritants to local communities, certain military tasks were also being transferred to ROK forces. Because the U.S. military was an all-volunteer force, it was significant that the consolidation of bases would enable improvements to the quality of life for the stationed troops, which would in turn facilitate recruitment.

14. (C) Downer agreed that capabilities were more important than numbers of troops in this era, but he asked whether all South Koreans agreed that this was the right time to downsize. LaPorte said some Korean conservatives were concerned, but after 50 years it was time to readjust the U.S. force structure. The USG's commitment and adherence to the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty with the ROK remained steadfast, and USFK were being transformed in cooperation with the ROKG and the South Korean people. He pointed to a USD 11 billion investment in improving U.S. forces' capabilities in the ROK.

CAPABLE ROK FORCES

15. (C) Downer asked for details on ROK forces. LaPorte told him there were 780,000 in uniform, and about 450,000 of those were army. He said the South Korean conscripts were quite well-equipped and trained. Downer asked COL Moug, the

Australian Defence Attache in Seoul who attended the meeting, for details of interaction between the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and ROK forces. Moug replied that most interactions were high-level exchanges, although several South Korean exchange students were also at Australian Defence Academies. He noted that the two countries' Special Forces officers had expressed interest in exercising together.

NORTH KOREAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES

16. (S/NF) FM Downer asked if it was correct that DPRK forces could unleash artillery shells and missiles into the Seoul basin and inflict tremendous damage before UN forces could neutralize their capability. LaPorte said there were some 250 North Korean underground artillery positions within range of Seoul which could fire high-explosive or chemical-filled shells. DPRK missiles could reach all of South Korea and Japan. However, the North Koreans' ability to win a conventional war was doubtful. Even with 1.2 million under arms, its air force and naval capabilities were limited. The DPRK had 18 MIG-29s; the other airplanes were much older. Its tanks were mostly old T-55s. DPRK pilots averaged 12 hours of flight training per year, while U.S. and ROK pilots received 12 - 15 hours per month. Sustainability and logistics capabilities were "not there," LaPorte stated. The artillery, though old, was the main threat. So the DPRK's leverage, Downer surmised, was the damage it could inflict on Seoul. LaPorte concurred, calling it the "tyranny of proximity." "Not that any of us believe in pre-emption," Downer chuckled, but what could the UN forces do if they thought it was necessary? General LaPorte emphasized that all of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) operational plans were premised on reacting to a North Korean attack.

SIX-PARTY TALKS: WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE?

17. (C) Downer stated that the universal line that the Six-Party Talks (6PT) had to resume was correct, but they also had to be effective. He thought there ought to be ways to bring additional pressure to bear on the DPRK leadership. He assumed Japan would be the first to apply sanctions; the rest of us needed to have plans in place, he urged. How the North Koreans would react to Japanese sanctions was anybody's guess, Downer said. General LaPorte noted that U.S. Ambassador to Korea Chris Hill had been named to replace EAP/AS James Kelly, and would take over the U.S. lead on the 6PT as well. The General expressed the USG's desire to continue the 6PT process and find a diplomatic solution, pointing out the irony of the accusations about U.S. unilateralism when the U.S. was working hard to keep the negotiations with the DPRK multilateral. North Korea would like nothing better than bilateral negotiations with the U.S., he remarked.

18. (C) Downer said bilateralizing the talks with the DPRK would be a huge mistake, not least because it was China which had the most leverage on North Korea. He noted that China wanted to play the role of honest broker and that was not good enough; Beijing had to understand that it had to bring its leverage to bear on Pyongyang. In addition, new strategies had to be devised to further constrain the North Koreans. The Foreign Minister called the PSI a worthy initiative, mentioning that Australia was a core player. Perhaps, he suggested, the PSI could be brought to bear more vigorously, although the North Koreans would "cry blue murder" in Beijing.

NORTH KOREAN NUKES

19. (S/NF) The FM asked General LaPorte how many nuclear warheads he thought the DPRK had: two or three? Downer and his Senior Adviser Haynes mentioned that IAEA DG ElBaradei had said Pyongyang could have as many as six, based on the number of fuel rods the North Koreans possessed. LaPorte thought the DPRK had the capacity to make more than two or three warheads, given the amount of plutonium "harvested" before the 1994 agreement and based on the DPRK's own claim of having reprocessed the 8,000 spent fuel rods after the agreement had ended. It was a high-risk strategy, he observed, that the North Koreans thought would lead to a big payoff but most likely would not. Downer agreed, noting it only strengthened the resolve of the international community. LaPorte commented that North Korea's ambiguity about whether it had nuclear weapons had served it well in the past. Now that it had confessed to having them, countries that had been sitting on the fence would have second thoughts.

UN COMMAND, DPRK INFRASTRUCTURE AND BLEEDING HEARTS

10. (C/NF) Asked to describe how the U.S. forces and the UN Command structure worked, LaPorte and COL Kevin Madden of the UN Command's Military Armistice Commission, explained that a

U.S. General served as the UN Commander and the U.S. Secretary of Defense served as the UN Command's Executive

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Agent. The UN Command in Korea reported annually to the UN Security Council and could do so more often if it wished. LaPorte emphasized that the transportation corridors through the DMZ represented the greatest change to the way South Koreans, at least, had lived for the past 50 years. Downer and Madden compared their personal experiences in Pyongyang, with Downer calling the DPRK capital "pathetic" with its darkened streets, cracked pavements and unmowed grass. LaPorte concurred that the DPRK infrastructure, including the power grid and rail lines, was decrepit. In closing, Downer remarked, "let the whole place go to s--t, that's the best thing that could happen." Speaking off the top of his head, he added that aid should not be given that would prop up the infrastructure. If U.S. officials wanted to hear the "bleeding hearts" view of "peace and love" with respect to North Korea, Downer joked, they only had to visit his colleagues in New Zealand. Downer said he personally agreed with President Bush that tyranny had to be ended.

PARTICIPANTS

11. (C) UN/U.S.: Commander of the UN Command in Korea, General Leon LaPorte; COL Kevin Madden of the UN Command's Military Armistice Commission; and Embassy Polmiloff. Australia: FM Alexander Downer; his Senior Adviser Bradley Haynes; Australian Defence Attache in Seoul COL John Moug; and DFAT Korea Section Executive Officer Charles Adamson.

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